

February 24, 2022

RE: Testimony **in support of H.B. No. 5037** (COMM) AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2023.

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Ranking Members, and other esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly, I am submitting testimony supporting H.B. No. 5037 (COMM) AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2023.

My name is Michele Voigt. I am the co-founder of Violent Crime Survivors, a survivor-led, community-based, wrap-around organization supporting victims and survivors of violent crime.

Connecticut is not immune to the national public health crisis of gun violence. So far in 2022, we have already experienced 63 incidents of gun violence that have killed 14 and injured 48 more. Hartford has experienced 20 incidents, Bridgeport 14, and New Haven 12. (GunViolenceArchive.org, 2022) Each incident affects more than victims, survivors, and shooters; it creates a tidal wave of trauma that pervades the community.

"Gun violence is a systemic trauma in that it permeates and impacts the social and interpersonal systems of those shot," says Charles Figley, Ph.D., a professor of social work and director of the Traumatology Institute at Tulane University in New Orleans. The mental health effects of gun violence often include anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

While secondary trauma is often associated with those closest to gun violence survivors, it affects others—from first responders assisting the scene of gun violence to health care workers who see the horrific damage gun violence causes. Repeat exposure to gun violence can magnify trauma's impact.

"Most often, gun violence survivors are similar to war veterans who must adapt to being exposed to danger and skilled at staying safe." "Examples of such adaptive behaviors include learning how to interpret noises, faces, and body language for possible threats. In these ways, gun violence survivors learn to accommodate the violence in their lives, but that comes at the cost of their psychosocial, medical, and mental health", Figley says.

Mental health problems can also affect a gun violence survivor's physical healing. A study of adults hospitalized for firearm-related injury found that those with preexisting depression had an increased risk of discharge to a care facility or in-hospital mortality. (Kalesan, 2015)

Although trauma related to gun violence is usually associated with the victims and their social networks, there also is trauma related to perpetrators, says Natalie Kroovand Hipple, Ph.D., an associate professor of criminal justice at Indiana University. With incarceration comes trauma for perpetrators' family members—for example, women who are left to care for children on

their own and children who can only see a parent by visiting a prison. And when perpetrators are released back into the community, they return having experienced the trauma of incarceration. (Reardon, 2020)

Perhaps the most disturbing traumatic effect of gun violence is that it can lead to more violence.

Hurt people hurt. Feeling unsafe, expecting to be victimized, and doubting that police will protect them, people in high-violence communities may choose to carry firearms for protection, says Jesenia Pizarro, Ph.D., an associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at Arizona State University. "Firearms are a prime facilitator of violence, and [a firearm] is a tool that increases the odds of violence," Pizarro says. "It becomes a never-ending cycle. Violence begets more violence." (Reardon, Gun Violence Trauma: Beyond the Numbers, 2020)

Untreated trauma makes victims more susceptible to depression, substance abuse, unhealthy relationships, and unemployment. It increases the likelihood of becoming violent themselves, edging away at the often thin line between victim and perpetrator.

To break the cycle of violence, we must invest in proven community-based violence prevention and intervention programs and organizations.

I have never suggested that funding solves any service barrier or outcome; this situation is different. There are exceptional violence prevention and intervention programs here in C.T. Boots on the ground, doing the work, day and night, for years, without the resources to meet the demand. Fund them at levels that can improve outcomes.

These culturally competent community-serving programs rooted in neighborhoods that experience concentrated violence and crime must be supported with multi-year flexible funding and sufficient resources to meet the need and must be scaled up across the state. The application processes to disperse funds to community-based organizations and reimbursement processes governing how these organizations are funded must be user-friendly. The state must eliminate barriers to resources reaching the organizations with the most community credibility and connection.

We strongly encourage the addition of a Commission on Gun Violence Intervention and Prevention. We believe it will improve strategic planning, state-wide coordination, data collection, and enhance outcomes. It will enable replication of successful projects and allow expansion of smaller community-serving programs rooted in neighborhoods of need. It can provide oversight ensuring that services are appropriate, equitable, and trauma informed.

Please support the \$3.6 million allocations to the Department of Public Health for community violence prevention included in Governor's Bill 5037.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Michele Voigt  
Violent Crime Survivors  
CEO / Co-founder  
Greenwich, CT

## Bibliography

*GunViolenceArchive.org*. (2022, 2 24). Retrieved from Gun Violence Archive :

<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/query/e8d5a845-74b9-4ab1-aa79-59d1604c675a?page=2&sort=asc&order=City%20Or%20County>

Kalesan, B. &. (2015). The relation of depression to in-hospital outcomes among adults hospitalized for firearm-related injury. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 183, 166-172.

Reardon, C. M. (2020). Gun Violence Trauma: Beyond the Numbers. *Social Work Today* , Vol. 20 No. 1 P. 10.